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Joe Maslanka

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Shoving the fifty dollars into her bra, we walk to Wysoki's truck. A misty rain floats through the illumination of the streetlights, steam rises off the black top, the smell of industry fills the air.

Her tight red miniskirt hugs an hourglass figure bulging in spots. Fishnet stockings, heavy makeup and a blonde wig complete her attire. Destiny, her working name, pokes her head into the truck.

"Okay, who needs a night of Destiny?"

"That'd be me, ma'am," he says in his unhurried Alabama drawl. PFC Elbert T. Gibbs, lumpy, squat-built, red, bushy flattop haircut, pock-marked face, and coke-bottle glasses. Flashing a sheepish grin, he vacates the truck. The fifty dollars is the result of a new initiative enacted by our platoon sergeant. We all donate a buck or two for the marine who really needs to "get some." Gibbs won the first vote, unanimously.

Destiny looks him up and down. "Uh, Miss Destiny just remembered something she got to take care of, baby. You come see me tomorrow night, sugar." She hands the fifty back to me and disappears into the mist.

"Well, Gibbs. Not tonight, brother. Not a lot of hookers out here, we best head back to Yorktown. We'll put the money back in the pot and try again in a couple weeks."

"Gawd, Maschefski, I jus' been-a-turned down by a prostitute. I'm a loser!" Gibbs starts banging his forehead on the hood of the pickup.

Wysoki propels his long, gangly body from the truck, grabs Gibbs and jacks him to the hood. "Hey, hey, Gibbs, you're gonna dent the ride. Get your ass back in the truck, it's over, man."

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Entering the truck first, I scoot to of the middle of the bench-seat. With Gibbs in the passenger seat, we make our way onto I64 West. Gibbs's hangs his head out the window. I'm fiddling with the radio, settling on a station, and turning up the volume on the new hit, our Platoon theme song, "Gotta Fight for Right to Party" by the Beastie Boys. An extraordinary thrust of wind swirls throughout the truck. Gibbs starts to lean his body out of the moving vehicle. I cuff one hand on his web belt, the other behind his collar, and pull him back.

"Holy shit!" Wysoki yells as he jams the brakes, the truck swerving to the side of the highway. "Damn it, Gibbs, I will fuck you up. What the hell's your major malfunction, numb nuts?" He rushes around the front of the truck and yanks Gibbs out, slamming him into the side of the truck. Gibbs is sobbing as Wysoki steps back with a look of concern and disgust.

"Turned down by a damn hooker. I'm a loser, Corporal Wy, oh gawd, I just wanna die."

"Ya ain't dyin' on my watch, ya crazy redneck." We force him into the middle seat and continue the journey back to the Naval Weapons Station.

Assigned to the same room in our quad, Gibbs was easy to like. His 'aw-shucks' southern demeanor and natural good nature were a sharp contrast to us, two hyped-up Yankees from Jersey. Gibbs would give you the shirt off his back, and he is far from dumb. He has solid command of the inner workings of our duties at the Naval Weapons Station, his weight and country-corn vibe kill any progress in rank. He was busted back to PFC for failing to get under his weight limit and for taking over twenty-seven minutes to run three miles during the last PFT.

The base is already rattled from two recent suicides. One, when a lance corporal, on the verge of being busted for drunk driving, decided not to face his war-decorated father. With only nine months left in the Corps, he swallowed the muzzle of his M16A1, blowing his brains out the rear window of a patrol truck.

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Later, a PFC from Michigan, in the corps less than eight months, went home on weekend leave and took his life with a pistol to the head. Nothing about the kid had indicated he'd do that. Wysoki and I decide to keep a lid on Gibbs' truck incident. Reflecting on the evening, we note how slowly he was leaning out of the truck and rationalize it as a cry for attention.

Following the incident in Newport News, we work through a two-week rotation of guard duty. To cheer up our buddy Gibbs, we load up a cooler of beer and take him to Yorktown Beach. We pile into the old truck—Wysoki calls it the 'Lock Mobile,' short for Polack, of which he and I are of descent. Proud and Polish. Our goal was to rub some of that northern-ethnic pride onto Gibbs.

"Ya over your shit, Gibbs, I been worried about you." I ask as the summer air flows through the truck, an invisible caress of freedom.

"Yeah, Mashefski, I'm over it. Still don't know how I'll ever live down gettin' rejected by a damn hooker."

"Quit beatin' yourself up, Gibbs, maybe she had a business meeting with her pimp." Wysoki offers an assuring elbow to Gibbs' ribs; he will forever own the middle seat.

"Ain't never made it with a girl, figured I'd join the corps and gals-a-be-a-wantin' me, man. Tried to talk to one at a club one night, she called me 'hog-boy' and walked away giggling with her friends, humiliatin'. Maybe I am a hog-boy, disgustin' hog-boy."

Pulling into a parking space, Wysoki jams the breaks and turns toward Gibbs. "Listen, ya wacky-ass hillbilly, we're here to have a good time, check out the chicks, drink some brews, and have fun while we're still young. Don't bring me down, Elbert, got it?"

We decide to chug a beer and do a shot for every girl that steps on to the beach as we sit on the banks for the York River. Circled around a cooler of Schaefer Beer like scuzzy-headed

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tribesman around their idol, we pass Wysoki's flask of cheap bourbon. It's a busy day; we're getting ripped.

Two young local girls approach us and ask if we'd share a few brews, which we do without hesitation. The conversation is light and flirtatious. Uninhibited from the many Schaefer's and little sips of bad bourbon, we decide to take a walk with the girls. Gibbs looks depressed. He lies back on his towel as we pop over to the Yorktown Pub with the bikinied Southern Belles.

After a couple hours of macho posturing, teasing and cocktails, one of the girls bums a buck for some music. She looks so fine strolling to the jukebox, but when she selects "If You Leave?" by Orchestral Maneuvers in the Dark, I realize we've left a depressed PFC Gibbs baking on the beach with a cooler of alcohol.

"Big Lock, we got to roll."

"What's your hurry, brother?"

"Hey, man, Gibbs is on the beach, alone," I say in a distraught whisper.

"Ah, fuck me! Ladies, it's been great, but we need to get back to our friend." We swap phone numbers with them and agree to meet back at the Pub Sunday night.

Wysoki and I double-time back to our spot on the beach and there, like a baked, beached baby whale, is PFC Gibbs, lobster-red and passed out.

Shaking his head, Wysoki sighs, "It's gonna hurt to wake him up. Man, he is burnt to a crisp, holy shit."

I take a knee next to Gibbs and begin tapping his cheek with the back of my hand.

"Gibbs, Gibbs, get up."

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His eyes crack open, squinting into the late-afternoon sun, “I’m fried, Mashefski, how long you two been gone?”

Helping him up, we gather our stuff as Gibbs Frankenstein-walks back to the truck. We stop by the drug store and get a gigantic jar of Noxzema. Wysoki and I each take one of Gibbs arms over our shoulders and guide him to our quad. Wysoki starts an ice-cold shower; we push Gibbs in as he lets out a banshee scream. We throw him onto his rack, dripping wet, still wearing his bathing suit. We douse him in Noxzema and leave him there to pass out.

Monday morning formation, guard mount, and final inspection before going on duty. Captain Connelly, our mustang platoon officer, is making his way through the ranks displaying his usual charm and wit. Former enlisted, he looks like Poindexter with his birth control, military-issue prescription glasses. Spindly when he arrived, his huge biceps have stirred up rumors of steroid usage. “What the fuck is that hanging out your nose?” He questions a lance corporal toward the end of the formation. “It looks like a nasty nose hair. A cockroach could rappel off that fucking nose rope, clip that shit.”

The toughest thing about Captain Connelly’s inspections is maintaining your composure as he berates and ranks on every discrepancy he uncovers, and he uncovers a lot.

“What. The. Fuck. What am I looking at? Are you shitting me, Gibbs? I see two days’ growth, you’re radiating like an ember, your breath stinks, and I am about two seconds from going apeshit on your ass. Staff Sergeant, Staff Sergeant, can you explain this bulbous fuck to me.”

Staff Sergeant Stanley Byrd, an easy-going marine corps careerist, saunters toward the captain. He looks at Gibbs and gives a light chuckle. He pulls off his cover, scratches his faded, tight afro, places a hand on Gibbs’ shoulder. “What the hell happened, Gibbs?”

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“Uh, Staff Sergeant, well, Corporal Wysoki and Lance Corporal Mashefski took me to the beach. I fell asleep and got burned pretty darn good.”

Captain Connelly intercedes. “Did you say those two Polacks took you to the beach and left you there?”

“No, sir, they didn’t-a-leave me, they went off for a bit and I passed out.”

“So, you were all drunk ass on the beach and the two senior marines left your sorry ass to fry. Is that what you’re saying, Gibbs?”

“Uh, well, sir, I ...”

My ass cheeks tighten. Wysoki cocks his head, ever so slightly, to flash me a peripheral look of horror.

“Hey, Wysoki, Mashefski, get your Polack asses down here.” The captain summons us. We hear the snickers as we double time to the end of the formation. “Is this your jackass handiwork?”

“Well, sir, we met these girls and Gibbs sort of fell asleep on the beach, and ...” Wysoki begins to stammer.

“Oh, oh, we just hooked up with a couple of Jody’s and left our platoon brother to sizzle like a freaking hot dog on a sandy grille? Is that what you’re saying, senior man, Wysoki?”

“Well, sir ...”

“Shut up, Wysoki. Here’s how it’s gonna go down, I’m writing your asses up for destroying government property. Wysoki, because you’re the senior man you’re getting an Article 15, and I hope to dock your pay. Your Polack sidekick is getting a page 13 entry and it won’t be kind. Try to get around that, Mashefski, when you’re up for corporal. Get your asses

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back in formation.” Captain Connelly turns toward Gibbs as we double-time back to the front of the line.

“As for you, you disgusting, fat, burnt-up piece of shit, take your sorry ass to the infirmary and let the navy docs diagnose your burns, because I can’t have a grizzly, unshaven hillbilly on duty. Now, get out of my face.”

We were concerned about Gibbs, but less so after the ass chewing we all took from the captain. Captain Connelly had instilled the eye of the tiger in Gibbs. He doesn’t want to kill himself, he just wants out.

Already on the bubble for his weight, he’s assigned to ‘Pork Chop Platoon.’ This is an unkind moniker for an assemblage of overweight marines from each guard platoon, hanging on to their careers. The corporals take turns running them through PT and monitoring their weight.

Friday weigh-ins reveal progress being made, and while five of the crew are dropping weight, Gibbs continues to go the other direction. We know what he’s doing, and we support him. As much as Wysoki and I hate to see him go, we know it’s best for him. So we vow to start and end every night on the town at a fast-food joint.

Gibbs doesn’t even get an opportunity to be tested in the next physical; after the third weigh-in he will get his general discharge. The marine corps decides to return their property.

Wysoki and I see our friend off with a final drunk fest on the Yorktown Beach.

Three months after his departure, and page 13 and all, I make corporal. I receive a congratulatory card postmarked Alabama. Gibbs includes a polaroid, his arm around a plump blonde as she’s kissing his cheek; he’s flashing a wide grin. He signs the card ‘*Your friend and defective property, Gibbs.*’